

Coal Street

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Coconuts, jackfruit, fish, papaya and rice... there's generosity to its geography. Bangladesh has a landscape that perpetually gives.

It's the morning and I'm sitting in Saju's living room. It's not his Dinajpur Town residence but the old cottage in a row of cottages at Parbatipur's Barapukuria Coal Mine: the place he calls home on workdays.

The housing strip is the old staff barracks. It currently houses employees unable to be accommodated elsewhere. Md Shajiul Islam, Saju Bhai, 43, is an assistant manager in the mechanical section. He's worked there for just short of eleven years.

The minor concrete laneway features cute front gardens of vines and fruit trees – but has no name. Unimaginatively I'm calling it Coal Street.

Inside, from the thought-about check curtains, the general order, you can tell Saju's wife has been there. But she's not there now – she's in town. Breakfast is done. I'm sitting alone. Saju's gone off somewhere. Backsoon.

It's strange to be in Saju's living room. For one thing there's a guest house at Barapukuria, where the mine managers suggested I should stay. Foreigners usually do. There's a club, a pond and tree-lined driveways – Barapukuria has British-style trappings, almost wishing it were a tea plantation.

It's better to stay in Coal Street – more personal, more real.

It's also strange because I only met Saju a few days earlier. It was largely coincidental. Like many in Dinajpur I'd taken to spending part of each evening at the enormous Boromath – the colonial-era field not dissimilar to Kolkata's Maidan. The Math is the town's pride, wholly suitable for adda, the art of chatting.

Funnily enough we'd just been talking about how to visit the mine when Saju arrived. It was Friday. He was home. Everything settled automatically, immediately, with no more effort than a ripened coconut falling. Hospitality is a second gravitational force in Bangladesh.

Unusually, I wasn't at a total loss as to visiting the mine. A friend in Dhaka saw on Facebook that I was in Dinajpur. He had a friend at the mine – they'd once done a short IT course together and in Bangladesh any engagement that gets beyond a "hello, hi" holds significant risk, like a monsoon raincloud heavy and ready to burst, of becoming the start of a long friendship. My friend thought to ring me so I could meet his friend.

I'd considered pursuing that but it proved unnecessary and when I mentioned my friend's friend's name – Kamol Mollick, Saju said he was his next-door-neighbour.



Md Shajiul Islam, 43, is assistant manager, mechanical sector, at Barapukuria Coalmine in Parbatipur, Dinajpur. He's worked at the mine for almost eleven years.

Bangladesh is diverse and chaotic but somehow among the huge randomness of 160 million it's often there's some sort of connection nearby. It's difficult to comprehend how it works but there's always that village-ness proximity lurking.

Sitting in Saju's living room I'm contemplating the previous evening – a small thing in particular – a mobile phone charger. Off his own bat, Saju enquired if my phone needed charging. When I said maybe it did, he sought the specific charger to fit. Someone on Coal Street had the right one.

It's such a small thing but the charger seemed symbolic: the living room snacks before the dinner in the coal canteen (with apologies for no home-cooked main meal); the checking every detail for sleeping in the guest room – extra blanket on the side

in case of cold snap, internet access... electronic repellent or mosquito net?

Bengali hospitality, is it culturally-genetically coded? There's genuine happiness from another's happiness. I'm wishing I could be more like that. I know for a fact I'd never think to ask a guest if their phone was alright.

I suppose I grew up in Australia. Much of it is ruggedly beautiful – there's hospitality too but it's



Accommodation on Coal Street might be simple but the sense of neighbourhood is strong.

different. It arises more infrequently, less expectedly, from a harsh geography.

In between thoughts, a middle-aged woman with a round face and rounder body, in a pleasant green sari, wanders in off the street through the open door leading to the garage. I wait for her to say something but she doesn't. She crosses the living room right in front of me. I wonder if she's a burglar. I wonder if I should disturb her at all, if, in Bangladesh, even a burglar might not expect to feel welcome.

Australian thinking cap on: it's strange. Bangladeshi thinking cap on: it is as it is... and I'm smiling a Bangladeshi smile at the thought.

I'm slightly pleased when she opens the fridge door. It's surely not usual for thieves to target refrigerated foodstuffs no matter what the cultural context. She seems to be loading vegetables in her arms. She's taking the lids off plastic containers in the freezer that might contain fish or meat.

I wait to see what happens.

Arms loaded she turns toward me and as she finally speaks I notice a few teeth missing. "Is your home far?" she says.

By this stage I'm almost certain she's no criminal. What I don't yet comprehend is that she's cooking my lunch. She looks after Coal Street when wives are away. She leaves as unceremoniously as she entered.

Koi fish, shing fish, chengra fish, tiger fish and not-sure-of-the-name fish... Kamol's house features an aquarium and when I met him on the previous evening there was some talk of its inhabitants. He's thirty-five, an assistant manager, electrical sector, who was also batching that day – his wife on a home visit to Khulna. His twin girls normally tear around the little street, so I'm told. Coal Street must've been missing their noise.

Friend of friend equals friend... Friend of neighbour equals friend... I was doubly qualified and it was hard to persuade Kamol not to make tea. In any case, word had travelled and there needed to be a visit over the road to Sattendra Barman's house – he's also an assistant manager.

Friend of neighbour equals friend... Friend of friend of neighbour equals friend... With his wife at home, all hope of not having tea was lost.

Once, she was supposed to study in Australia but at the last minute she couldn't go. It might have been

good for her career but I wonder if it wasn't a happy twist of fate.

I know, yes I know... Australia is the dream country, I hear it often. Yet it can only be from taking the little things – the important things – for granted; from assuming it all just continues on the other side of an ocean. Life in Bangladesh can be a struggle, of course... but Coal Street... who is it that would need to leave that? Big house, flashy car... what I've never properly understood: Why?

Later that day I visit the mine. There are already known-people to wave hello to.

And afterwards there's feedback from Mr Mollick via my friend in Dhaka. "I only wish I could've done more for him." I should've let him make tea.

Could the Bangladesh government perchance, or the Barapukuria Coal Mining Company not send some foreign aid to Australia to teach Bangladeshi hospitality? I wonder. Feeling guilty: at my place will have to do better than coffee and biscuits... will need to think about other people's mobile phone batteries.

Coconuts, jackfruit, fish, papaya and rice... distractions... I should be writing about coal... ■